

Halal and Haram: The Islamic Dietary Laws

Islamic Rules About Eating and Drinking

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Like many religions, Islam prescribes a set of dietary guidelines for its believers to follow: In general, Islamic dietary law distinguishes between food and drink that are allowed (*halal*) and those that are prohibited (*haram*). These rules serve to bond followers together as part of a cohesive group and, according to some scholars, they also serve to establish a unique Islamic identity. For Muslims, the dietary rules of allowed and forbidden foods are fairly straightforward to follow. The rules for how allowed food animals are killed are more complicated.

Islam shares much in common with Judaism in regards to dietary rules, even though in many other areas, Quranic law is focused on establishing distinctions between Jews and Muslims. The similarity in dietary laws is likely a legacy of the similar ethnic backgrounds of these Abrahamic religious groups.

Halal: Food and Drink that Are Allowed

Muslims are allowed to eat what is "good" (Quran 2:168)—that is, food and drink identified as pure, clean, wholesome, nourishing and pleasing to the taste. In general, everything is allowed (*halal*) except what has been specifically forbidden. Under certain circumstances, even prohibited food and drink can be consumed without the consumption being considered a sin. For Islam, a "law of necessity"

allows for prohibited acts to occur if no viable alternative exists. For example, in an instance of possible starvation, it would be considered non-sinful to consume otherwise forbidden food or drink if no halal were available.

Haram: Forbidden Food and Drinks

Muslims are enjoined by their religion to abstain from eating certain foods. This is said to be in the interest of health and cleanliness, and in obedience to the Allah's rules. In the Quran (2:173, 5:3, 5:90-91, 6:145, 16:115), the following foods and drinks are strictly prohibited (*haram*):

- Dead meat (i.e. the carcass of an already-dead animal—one that was not slaughtered by the proper method).
- Blood.
- The flesh of swine (pork).
- Intoxicating drinks. For observant Muslims, this even includes sauces or food-preparation liquids that might include alcohol, such as soy sauce.
- The meat of an animal that has been sacrificed to idols.
- The meat of an animal that died from electrocution, strangulation or blunt force.
- Meat from which wild animals have already eaten.

Correct Slaughtering of Animals

In Islam, much attention is given to the manner in which animals' lives are taken in order to provide food, because in the Islamic tradition, life is sacred and one must kill only with God's permission, to meet one's lawful need for food.

Muslims slaughter their livestock by slitting the animal's throat in a swift and merciful manner, reciting "In the name of God, God is Most Great" (Quran 6:118–121). The animal should not suffer in any way, and should not see the blade before slaughter. The knife must be razor sharp and free from any blood of a previous slaughter. All of the

animal's blood must be drained before consumption. Meat prepared in this manner is called *zabihah*, or simply, *halal meat*.

These rules do not apply to fish or other aquatic meat sources, which are all regarded as halal. Unlike Jewish dietary laws, in which only aquatic life with fins and scales are regarded as kosher, Islamic dietary law views any and all forms of aquatic life as halal.

Commercially Prepared Meats

Some Muslims will abstain from eating meat if they are uncertain of how it was slaughtered, without knowing that the animal was killed in a humane fashion. They also place importance on the animal having been bled properly, as otherwise it would not be considered healthy to eat.

However, some Muslims living in predominantly-Christian countries hold the opinion that one may eat commercial meat (apart from pork, of course), and simply pronounce God's name at the time of eating it. This opinion is based on the Quranic verse (5:5), which states that the food of Christians and Jews is lawful food for Muslims to consume.

Increasingly, major commercial meat packers have been establishing certification processes for assuring that their foods comply with Islamic dietary rules. In much the same way that Jewish consumers can identify kosher foods at the grocer, Islamic consumers can find properly slaughtered meats labeled "halal certified." With the halal food market occupying a 16 percent share of the entire world's food supply and expected to grow, it is certain that halal certification from commercial food producers will become a more standard practice with time.